



## NEWS

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### LYME ART ASSOCIATION CELEBRATES AN ILLUSTRIOUS PAST AND PROMISING FUTURE IN A CENTENNIAL ART EXHIBITION

Old Lyme, Connecticut – The Lyme Art Association, one of the oldest arts organizations in the country, will mount a landmark exhibition, “Lyme Light 2002 and The Early Years:1902-1930,” celebrating its one-hundred years of art exhibitions from June 15 through July 21.

Focus of the two-part exhibition will be the juried work of current members who were charged with the challenge of painting the still-extraordinary Lyme landscape, and the historic exhibition of renowned early Lyme Colony artists, including William Chadwick, Childe Hassam, and Henry Ward Ranger.

One-hundred-thirty-one paintings by seventy-six of the early artist members were “generously” loaned by private collectors throughout Connecticut; many of these works have rarely, if ever, been seen by the public, according to Jeanne Ledoux-Stewart, executive director of the Lyme Art Association.

#### A Look Back

“In 1899 when Henry Ward Ranger set his eyes on the village of Old Lyme, he was smitten,” writes archivist Linda Ahnert in the exhibition catalogue. “Already an established painter who had spent years studying in Europe, he had a typically American reaction – he began to dream. Ranger’s dream was to establish a colony where he and other artists schooled in the Tonalist tradition could paint a uniquely American setting.”

What Ranger saw was the beautiful New England village with broad, tree-lined streets, handsome houses and farms with stone wall borders, and forests thick with Mountain Laurel. Set on the Connecticut River with its meandering tributaries, the Lieutenant River and the Eight Mile River, islands and coves and extensive salt marshes, it was, and remains a painter’s paradise.

*celebrating one hundred years of art exhibitions*



Ranger declared: "It looks like the Barbizon." The reference was to the French town that was home to the Barbizon artists who painted outdoors (en plein air) rather than in their studios. In fact Percival Pollard in a review in the Sunday, September 6, 1908 edition of *The New York Times* referred to "The Artists in Connecticut's Barbizon."

Artists flocked to the new art colony. "The focus of the Old Lyme Colony turned to Impressionism with the arrival of Childe Hassam in 1903," wrote Kathleen Kienholz in a 1998 issue of *American Art Review*. "Already considered one of the preeminent artists of his day, Hassam effectively endowed the colony with the sanction of the American artistic establishment." (Ms. Kienholz is the archivist and manuscript curator of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and will lecture at the gallery on Childe Hassam and American Impressionism on June 26).

### **Miss Florence To the Rescue**

The artists were fortunate, too, to be able to lodge at the home of Miss Florence Griswold. Miss Florence, a descendent of a distinguished Connecticut family was in financial straits and decided to turn her beautiful, though rundown home built by her sea-captain father, into a boarding house for New York artists. She would become their lifelong patron and confidante.

With her encouragement and an extraordinary landscape, the artists became prolific painters but had no gallery to exhibit their work. They found welcome down the street at the Phoebe Griffin Noyes Library, an elegant brick structure newly opened in 1898.

Their first exhibition was held there on August 27, 1902, the date the Lyme Art Association celebrates in this year's centennial. A broadside announced: "An Exhibition of Well-Known Artists. Admission: fifty cents. Proceeds for the benefit of the Library." The Ladies' Library Association was thrilled with the proceeds: \$180. The exhibitions became a summer tradition which the library hosted until 1920.

"By 1914, Old Lyme was one of the most highly acclaimed art colonies in the United States and its summer exhibitions captured national attention," Ms. Kienholz wrote, "the town became a popular destination for collectors and art critics."

Many of the artists settled in Old Lyme, forming the Lyme Art Association in 1914. When the need for their own gallery arose, Miss Florence deeded them (for the sum of one dollar) a portion of her property (adjacent to her home, now the Florence Griswold Museum).



## **An Architectural Gem**

One of the artists, who was also an architect, Charles A. Platt, donated his services and the gallery was built in 1921. It is said to be the first art gallery to have been built and financed entirely by the artists themselves. Architecturally it is unique because it is the only shingle-style gallery building that Platt ever designed. Later he gained fame as architect of the Freer Gallery in Washington, D.C. The building was named to the National Register of Historic Places.

It is rare that any art organization could have such staying power, much less such dramatic exhibition space. Adding to its longevity, and perhaps because of it – the simple shingle-style structure belies a stunning interior space with 3,200 square feet of skylighted galleries.

Of the 1921 exhibition, *The New York Times* said: “It is impossible to write of this year’s exhibition without letting the gallery in which it is held usurp a large share of attention. It is the ideal gallery... greater appropriateness and refinement of taste hardly could be found.... The building belongs to the location as a Connecticut wildflower to the countryside.”

## **A Look Ahead**

So the Lyme Art Association honors those prescient artists who established this special art colony that has become an important part of the history of American art. Building on that heritage, the Association continues to showcase the work of today’s artist members – now numbering 600 strong. Mindful of the community as well, they provide art instruction, workshops, art lectures and outreach programs.

Fortunately the Old Lyme landscape that stretches the Connecticut River and Long Island Sound, has not been marred by commercial or industrial development, although a major interstate transects it. Most of the farms have vanished, but still there are meadows and marshes where the worst invader appears to be the phragmites. Today’s artists continue to paint this rare landscape in the “Lyme light.”

In a special “Summer Solstice” event June 17 through 19, artists will set up their easels and paint “en plein air,” just as the early artists did. Painting sites include the Association’s lawn and other historic places in Lyme. Visitors can buy the freshly created work at a “Wet Paint Auction” on Saturday, June 22.

The Lyme Art Association is located at 90 Lyme St., adjacent to the Florence Griswold Museum, in the heart of the Old Lyme Historic District, just off I-95 Exit 70. Gallery hours: Tues.-Sat., 10am-4:30pm; Sun. 1-4pm. For more information, call 860-434-7802.

